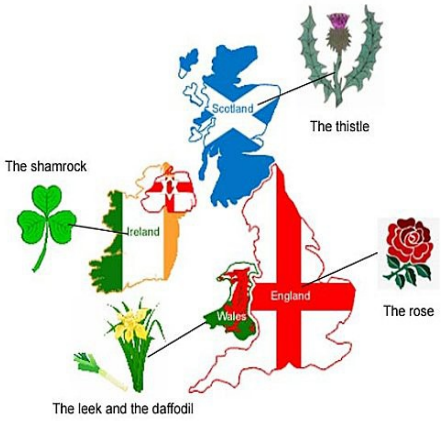
Scotland and Devolution



Along with England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Ulster), Socatland is one of the four « home nation » the UK consists of. Each of the nations has their own specific features, their own flag, their patron saint, and their sports teams. As a distinct nation, Scotland has managed to conserve its own education and legal systems, as well as its own church (*the Scottish Kirk*), its own language (*Scottish Gaelic*, a Celtic tongue, which is alive in the Western Highlands and islands, even though compulsory education is dispensed in English. As far as their identity is concerned, Scots no doubt feel British on account on some characteristics they share with the rest of the UK. However, their loyalty tends to go first to their nation – a phenomenon that is said to have gained ground since the recent rise of nationalism following the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland with talks of a second referendum on the independence of Scotland (INDYREF 2)

1. A brief history of Anglo-Scottish relationships

The relationship between the Celtic fringe and the inner core has often been difficult and particularly so between Edinburgh and London. It reached the nadir during the so-called « wars of independence », led by William Wallace and then Robert the Bruce. The latter defeated Edward II, attempting to bring Scotland under England's rule. Yet, it was the various cross-border conflicts which culminated with the defeat of the Scots at Flodden in 1513 that paved the way for the unification of the Scottish and English crowns in 1603, whereby James VI of Scotland became the monarch of bothe kingdoms. It was not until 1707, though, that the union was cemented by the two nations' political unification following a financial crisis affecting Scotland. Through the Act of Union, all political power was transferred to Westminster, although Scotalnd was able to conserve its own legal system, church and universities.

2. Devolution

It was the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1997 that led to a far-reaching shake-up of Britain's political life, and, by entension, to a redefinition of the relationship between Edinburgh and London. The issue of accrued autonomy was rekindled in the 1970s for reasons ranging from a sense of British economic decline and misgovernment in London by which Scotland was allegedly worse affected, the discovery of North Sea Oil making it possible for Scotland to contemplate breaking away from London to the works of the Kilbrandon Commission, advocating a form of devolution.

All these factors contributed to the rise of Scottish nationalism but when the first development bill was submitted by the Labour Party mainly to stave off further development of the separatist cause, the ensuing referendum turned out to be a resounding defeat for nationalists insofar as a mere 33% of the Scots said « yes » to greater self-governance in 1979.

The issue was buried again only to resurface during the Thatcher era, because of the Prime Minister's unpopular « poll tax [1] » in Scotland. Support for devolution rose substantially in opinion polls but it was Tony Blair's Labour Party that staged the 1997 referendum on devolution, which returned a resounding « yes ».

Devolution means the « surrender of powers to local authorities by a central government (Merrian Webster's definition). » In the case of the UK, it came down to Westminster conferring a wide range of powers to the elective Scottish Parliament (with its seat located in the Holyrood area of Edinburgh) and National Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, thus enabling the three peripheral nations to achieve a degree of self-government. The Scottish Parliament is a unicameral assembly, made up of 129 members, known as MSPs, and a First Minister (Premier Ministre), currently Ms. Nicola Sturgeon . Legal devolution came along with executive devolution. All three devolved nations of the UK are still represented at Westminster, with 59 Scottish Mps.

Under the *Scotland Act* of 1998, Holyrood (Scottish Parliament) is allowed to legislate on the so-called devolved matters in the following fields : agriculture, forestry and fishing, education, environmental policy, health, housing, justice, policing and courts, economic development and some transport. Westminster is therefore entitled to legislate on national policy regarding all other fields and is vested with « reserved powerds » – i.e. Constitution, immigration and nationality, foreign affairs, defence, international relations, economic policy and energy. The Scottish Parliament is authorized to levy taxes, though « *the Tartan tax* » has never been raised so far.

1 = « capitation » : impôt locatif forfaitaire par tête, instauré en 1989 par M.Thatcher.

Tony Blair's New Labour argued that the measure allowed to meet the demands for the acknowledgement of Scottish nationhood, thus settling the national question. By contrast, Conservatives viewed devolution as spurring the rise of nationalism and a slippery slope to the unravelling of the United Kingdom.

3. The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence

The Tories may not have been completely mistaken when claiming devolution could help nationalism of the Celtic fringe to grow : in May 2011, the *Scottish National Party* with Alex Salmond at its head won a landslide victory, thus obtaining a majority in Holyrood and a mandate for a referendum on independence. It was in 2014, under David Cameron's Conservative government, that Scots were granted the opportunity to have their voices heard through a ballot.

Pro-independence campaigners claimed Scotland would fare better if it struck it alone, chiefly owing to its North Sea oil revenues. They also held policymakers at Westminster responsible for the economic strife Scottish people had experienced for several years. In essence, the main argument they forwarded was that Scotland would be best ruled by its own residents and its own national Parliament.

On the other hand, fearing the UK was about to unravel, unionists emphasized the potentially dramatic aftershocks such a split could entail. They repeatedly warned Scots about the risks they would incur if they became independent. Most importantly, they claimed taxes would have to be raised substantially to uphold Edinburgh's public spending levels, all the more so as the distribution of public funds has always been more favourable to Edinburgh. It was also stressed that on account of dwindling oil prices and limited oil reserves, Scotland's main economic asset could not be taken for granted in the long term. On top of it, Scots were advised against breaking away from the UK on the grounds that Scotland was bound to face economic predicament as independence was tantamount to severing links with the EU and breaking the currency union, which could in turn unsettle the newly-created state's economy and make firms and banks flee.

The unionist camp prevailed on September 18th 2014, as 54.2 percent of voters chose to remain within the UK. The outcome caused First Minister Alex Salmond to step down, but the referendum whetted the interest in the question of Scottish sovereignty instead of smothering it.

4. Brexit – a game-changer ?

The vote served to highlight the deep fractures within the country, (many commentators went as far as to describe it as a « disunited kingdom ». It certainly shed light on the chasm between England and Wales on the one hand, and Scotland and Northern Ireland on the other hand, the former having opted for Brexit and the latter having overwhelmingly voted to remain in the EU.

For First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, Brexit should definitely be considered as a major game-changer. « As things stand, Scotland faces the prospect of being taken out of the EU against our will, which I regard as democratically unacceptable », she declared in the wake of the referendum. Along with other independence advocates, Sturgeon has consistently claimed that what Britain Scots voted for in 2014 is a far cry from what is on offer now, hence the need for a second referendum (INDYREF 2). However, independence opponents underline that the economic case for independence is even worse now than in 2014. Should Scotland leave, its economy would heavily rely on North Sea oil, but plunging crude price leads one to think that Edinburgh had better not strike it alone. It is also considered that it should preserve the union on account of its high trade volumes with the rest of the UK, which account for more of the exports, far more than to the rest of the EU. Moreover, if Scotland were to break away from the UK, it would face a significant loss of tax revenues, which in turn would deal a heavy blow to its budget. On top of it, should Scotland become independent, it would still need to apply for EU membership and persuade other member countries that it is worthy joining the bloc, and it is feared that Spain, grappling with separatist movements of its own, would be unsympathetic to Scotland's application. All in all it is claimed that Scotland had better remain part of the UK, however unfair it might seem to some.

However, Scottish nationalists should not be ignored by Westminster as the four-nation country's future may heavily hinge on the aftermath of Brexit on Britain's economic health. If Scots were to elave, the UK would be deprived of one third of its landmass, along with Scotland's beauciful mountains and lochs and Edinburgh's famous tourist spots, its population would drop by 8 percent and around 9 percent of its GDP would be lost. Last but not least, Britain's standing in the world would thus be undermined and the existence of its nuclear deterrent (Trydent) with bases in Scitland would be put at risk.